

My Inner Game of Action Learning

A corporation recently hired me. They needed a single topic AL series, so I went through the standard preparations, including my constant ritual reminders that not only do I not know how this will play out, it is my job not to know. Only then am I prepared to be surprised as the group navigates their own breakthroughs.

In this case, our group work began in an ordinary way. Then, in the first intervention, I asked: "What is the quality of our questions?" Their response was anything but standard. Together, they quickly formulated and articulated their new awareness that it was necessary for the good of the entire organization for them to now begin to think differently. They called on themselves to prepare to think and act "out of the box." There's no way I, or anyone else, could have imposed such a move on them with such powerful effect.

From that point on, an observer might have thought I was doing nothing in particular. My only job was to lightly hold the space for them – to be witness to their new way – while the group went through the entire WIAL single set process. I was also prepared to intervene if other intervention was necessary. The truth is that it took me a very long time to learn to do nothing. I've found that to do this takes everything I've got.



At the end of the final session in the group's reflection, they talked about their learning. They each reported they felt a sense of pride and had grown. The problem presenter said "This solution is far better than the solution I had just 2 weeks ago. It's more thorough and comprehensive." The whole group radiated confidence.

My initial experience as a professional coach and a coach trainer in a large organization led me to wonder, how is it that some of my most impactful coaching sessions unfolded in very non-intuitive ways. That's when I started to consider what I'd call the spirit of coaching: When I have a group with disparate needs, how can I be of the greatest support to all? I began to realize that I was not personally the driving force behind these sessions. Something else was at play. What was it? Mostly I saw that the less I did – the less attached I was – the lighter my presence was – the more impactful the session was for participants. I heard that people call this "holding the space." For me, it also points to the spirit of coaching.

This spirit, this holding the space matches a concept from Lao Zi, the ancient Chinese Taoist philosopher. In the words of Chris Corregan (in "The Tao of Holding Space") "The

best leaders are those people we hardly know exist. The next best is a leader who is loved and praised. Next comes the one who is feared. The worst one is the leader that is despised. If you don't trust the people, they will become untrustworthy. The best leaders value their words, and use them sparingly. When she has accomplished her task, the people say, "Amazing: we did it all by ourselves!"

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